

# Broken Light: Urbanization, Waste, and Violence in Lewis Baltz's Nevada Portfolios

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## Abstract

Lewis Baltz's photographic portfolios *Nevada* (1977) and *Near Reno* (1986) anticipate the work Richard Misrach and Peter Goin each composed in the state of Nevada in the early 1990s: from shot-up junk, to the military theater of Bravo 20, to the Nevada Test Site, these image-makers represented topographies of violence in the desert. This essay offers a close reading of Baltz's Nevada images to consider the way light and waste in the landscape are mobilized to register how sociohistorical discourses of the desert perhaps make such spaces vulnerable to urbanization and how these tropes encode the process in a language of violence.

## Keywords

Lewis Baltz, landscape photography, Nevada, light, waste, violence, urbanization

Here, no matter how many houses rear up, stark in the sunlight, you remain more aware of the sweeping domes of earth which hold them down, and no matter how long you stay in one of the houses, you will still be more aware of Mt. Rose aloft upon the west, than of anything in the house: furniture, silver, books, or even people.

—Walter Van Tilburg Clark, *The City of Trembling Leaves* (1945)

Only on the margins do we explicitly weigh the relative virtues of a few more subdivisions against a few more berry fields or orange groves.

—Carl Abbott, *How Cities Won the West* (2008)

Walter Van Tilburg Clark (1945) assures readers that the aesthetic grandeur surrounding Reno, Nevada, especially the most prominent peak in the nearby Sierra range, Mount Rose, cannot be muted by the forces of urbanization (p. 289). Several decades later, faith in big nature and clear skies has been thrown into doubt. However, as Carl Abbott notes (2008), we have to move to the urban periphery to find grounds for such skepticism. After World War II, the urban centers of the western United States mushroomed, though, it is difficult to see traces of this history from within these urban landscapes. When the pavement is down, and the buildings are up, cities take on a

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given nature. Furthermore, urban growth in the West is predominantly a horizontal process. It takes a view from the outskirts to bring western city-making into perspective.

Lewis Baltz's black-and-white photographic portfolios *Nevada* (1977) and *Near Reno* (1986) survey the margins of the state's second-most populous city and its surrounding desert spaces. Both projects position horizontal markers of urbanization against the depth of the landscape, the openness of the desert, and the verticality of the nearby hills and mountains. Individual tract houses, churches, cherry-stem neighborhoods, and industrial warehouses appear splayed out on the desert floor and in juxtaposition with the verticality of striated rock fins exposed on an arid hillside and the treeless mounded topography of the foothills, for instance. This wave of urbanization appears alienated from a recognizable city center. However, the growth Baltz seems to interrogate speaks to changing population structures in the region: From the time of Clark's 1940s Nevada, to Baltz's Nevada of the 1970s and 1980s, western states shifted from 64% urban to 88% urban (Abbott, 2008). While both portfolios take development as their central phenomenon of visual study, each employs different tropes in its critique. *Nevada* engages with the history of light in American landscape representation, rearticulating the metaphor within the built environment—rendering, for example, homes in high-contrast tones, blazing with incandescent electric light—while the images also blot out the desert with shadows, soften the horizon in haze, and cover the desert floor in murky light filtered through gray skies. Produced almost one decade later, *Near Reno* employs images of trash imbedded in the landscape to ironize the trope of the desert wasteland. We see an aluminum can riddled with gunshots, a bullet-perforated television set, a rogue dump outside the city where scraps of metal are heaped alongside bags of trash. These images report violent processes of place-making, one in which the sublime presence of the western landscape has been called into question. My ambition in this reading, however, is not to draw direct equivalences between violence against human bodies and violence against spaces and places. Rather, I examine these works by Baltz in the state of Nevada from the 1970s and 1980s to explore how his photography uses the language of violence to visualize processes of urbanization. Light and waste, in Baltz's images, tell us a story of how American ideals of homeownership snuffed out a romantic, radiant image of the West. Of Baltz and other photographers working in a similar vein, art critic Dave Hickey (1999) tells us that many revisionist landscape photographers, from the 1970s onward, were “informed by the suspicion that the way we represent the landscape is somehow complicit in our exploitation of it” (pp. 23-25). That we find darkness, illumination, and trash, in Baltz's images from the western edge of the Great Basin, points to a reconfiguration of landscape ideology and an historical discourse of disposability that opens spaces for violence in the desert. In what follows, I argue that Baltz's early Nevada work confronts the notion that historical visual metaphors of illuminated landscapes no longer suffice as grounds to preserve landscape as sanctified form. I will also argue that Baltz's later photography of the region uses objects of waste to expose how discourses of the desert make such spaces vulnerable to an unbridled mode of urbanization.

### Shattered Luminosity: Baltz's First Nevada Portfolio

Baltz produced *Nevada* two years after he and others participated in the 1975 George Eastman House show called *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* which has been read by many critics and art historians as an anti-aesthetic turn in landscape photography. Similar in style to images associated with *New Topographics*, *Nevada* is a series of black-and-white photographic prints in which Baltz visualizes the transition from “Landscape-to-Real-Estate,” as critic Gus Blaisdell framed Baltz's similar work in *Park City* (1978-1980; Haworth-Booth, 1990, p. 79). *Nevada* is a suite of 15 silver-gelatin prints in an original edition of 40. Each image is printed on 8 by 10-inch paper, and the set is housed in a gray cloth-bound portfolio case. Baltz uses the subject of light in *Nevada* to invert the relationship between built

and natural environments. In so doing, he portrays architectural spaces as the newly illuminated landscape; meanwhile, the desert wilderness, in this series, has lost its radiance. To show how Baltz's images attempt to subvert historical landscape aesthetics, it is helpful to look briefly at uses of light in earlier modes of American landscape representation.

Without rehashing debates about so-called "luminism" (Sweeney, 2003), I simply wish to engage the notion that nineteenth-century American painters often employed light to value landscapes, to condition them with spiritual meaning. Rather than focusing on a transcendent source of light, many painters represented the landscape itself as radiant (Hargrove, 2008). In this way, artists such as Frederic Edwin Church, for example, "introduced moral and religious value into landscape painting," and, to the extent it follows, into cultural perceptions about the physical environment (Hargrove, 2008, pp. 41-42). Deborah Bright (1992) and Barbara Novak (2007) both suggest that we can connect the aesthetic ideals from the Hudson River School to survey photography from the late 19th century West. However, the resulting transcendental nature in the medium, as Naomi Rosenblum (1984) suggests, is somewhat contradictory:

Photographs of western scenery [at this time] were conceived as documentation . . . but they project a surpassing spirit, a sense of buoyant wonder at the grandeur of the wilderness. These images embody the romanticism of mid-century painting and literature—the belief that nature in general and mountains in particular are tangible evidence of the role that the Supreme Deity played in the Creation. (p. 131)

Survey photographers such as William Henry Jackson, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, and Carleton Watkins, interpreted in this way, had parallel interests in recording the geography of the West as empirical fact while they pointed their cameras to sublime scenes. Emily Ballew Neff (2006) suggests that O'Sullivan's work in Nevada is the leading example of the sublime record, arguing that "Sand Dunes, Carson Desert, Nevada" (1867) "best expresses this nineteenth-century liminal space between specimen and symbolic landscape" (p. 27). Neff also posits that this symbolism, at the time of O'Sullivan's survey work, was beginning to be recoded. The ambiguity and openness of desert spaces had often been "cast in terms of the sublime," but with travel and hardship redefining people's experience of the arid West, "the spaces [became] culturally loaded as negative" (Neff, 2006, p. 27). For Baltz then, working in Nevada in the late 20th century, the historical desert West had at least two conventional visual connotations: the desert as region of sublime wilderness filled with light and the desert as a negatively charged space of hardship and difficulty. Writing about revisionist landscape photography following the New Topographics moment, Hickey (1999) suggests that "photographers like Peter Goin, Richard Misrach, [and] Lewis Baltz," who all worked extensively in Nevada, had to "break the metaphorical interference that binds the photographic 'instant' to natural 'eternity,' the 'formal picture' to the 'balance of nature,' the high contrast glamour of 'angled light' to the stability of 'nature's cycles'" (p. 25). In this process, he claims, photographers would confront two issues: "first, they must somehow secularize a subject matter with complex religious overtones; and second, they must somehow redeem a practice whose formal and aesthetic 'virtues' are heavily invested with those transhistorical religious overtones" (Hickey, 1999, p. 25). For Baltz, it would seem, one approach is to draw on the descriptive framework of the survey tradition while also making ironic inversions of the photographic and painterly strategies that previously moralized the landscape. In this way, tensions arise in his work between documentation and provocation, neutrality and pathos. For example, the plain and descriptive image captions in Baltz's *Nevada* evoke the western survey tradition in naming places and aspects. Consider the following titles from the project: "Lemmon Valley, looking north"; "Lemmon Valley, looking northeast"; "Lemmon Valley, looking northwest, toward Stead." Further, without descriptive accompanying captions, *Near Reno* suggests an even more clinical, objective, and distanced position from its subjects: "Element #1," "Element



**Figure 1.** Lewis Baltz, “Element #4” [Fluorescent Tube], 1977, from the *Nevada* portfolio, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 6-2/3 inches high by 9-1/2 inches wide on 8 by 10-inch paper. © Lewis Baltz, courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica, California.

#2,” “Element #3.” By way of inversion, Baltz’s first Nevada portfolio manipulates the subject of light in nature to disenchant the romantic landscape. The images deconstruct the notion of luminosity and relocate sources of light within built environments, thus depicting a new desert secularized by urban growth. Though, reading Baltz’s work as a project that disavows the sublime and its associated strong feelings and responses, to analyze it instead in terms of flat and cool neutrality, would indeed be to miss something. When considering the work only in reference to a history of survey photography and Romantic landscape painting we may be encouraged all too simply to take Baltz’s work as dispassionate and aesthetically distanced. Toby Jurovics (2010), in an essay from the revisionist collection *Reframing the New Topographics*, rejects the notion of coolness associated with Baltz and others in the New Topographics camp, rereading the photographer’s work to account for its strong and negative registers. “There is clearly nothing neutral about his position,” Jurovics writes about Baltz: “Far from being emotionally barren, Baltz’s photographs openly convey sadness, disappointment, and anger at how we have used the landscape” (p. 7). While I agree that Baltz’s style is anything but neutral, it may be a mistake to overlook the contradictions within these images, their feelings of ambivalence. More on this later.

*Nevada* starts with what Baltz (1985, p. 78) calls “open landscapes.” Three long views begin the series, evoking the style of survey photography: wide open spaces, milky and cloudless skies, a high contrast between dark shadows and light flooding the mountains. Historically, some of these effects were produced by long exposure times which early photographic technology necessitated. Baltz’s landscapes, however near in form and content to survey views, also show neighborhoods of clustered homes settled against the edges of the desert. After these three opening pictures—each composed with a large depth of field—viewers encounter “Fluorescent Tube,” an image shot hovering above a cylindrical fluorescent light broken into the gravel (Figure 1). What appear to be tire tracks in the dirt cut diagonally across the frame, gesturing to the cause of the smashed light. With Baltz’s horizonless perspective, this image speaks in a confrontational tone.



**Figure 2.** Lewis Baltz, “Element #7” [Night Construction, Reno], 1977, from the *Nevada* portfolio, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 6-2/3 inches high by 9-1/2 inches wide on 8 by 10-inch paper. © Lewis Baltz, courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica, California.

By collapsing aesthetic distance (the space theorized in the 18th century as necessary for the proper appreciation of nature and art), and by bringing the viewer into close proximity with the fragmented object imbedded in the landscape, the desert is no longer seen safely from afar. Rather, the image presents itself within the viewer’s own social space. The texture and overall bright composition provide no place for the eye to rest. From this point of dissonance, the portfolio returns to more long views, affording “Fluorescent Tube” the provocative character of an anomaly in the more traditionally composed landscapes of the series. The seventh print in the set is “Night Construction, Reno,” an image with the cleanest lines and strongest geometric and formal elements of the portfolio (Figure 2). In this image, Baltz centers the picture on a small floodlight illuminating the framework of a home going up after dark. It is as if development in Nevada happens around the clock, at a casino’s time-voiding pace.

The relationship between “Fluorescent Tube” and “Night Construction, Reno” captures what I argue to be the ethos of Baltz’s experiment with the *Nevada* portfolio. Together the images deconstruct the transcendental light so often associated with the West; this romanticism, *Nevada* suggests, has left the desert. The mountains appear as silhouettes of no greater importance than the heap of shadowed dirt in front of the home shimmering with artificial light. Furthermore, the light of the landscape has been relocated inside the built environment. What shines, in an ironic glow, is development. Baltz’s “Night Construction, Reno” depicts the surface of two-by-sixes and plywood in the same way that Albert Bierstadt’s granite walls of Yosemite held a heavenly light on earth.

Baltz carries this theme through the other images of the series. “B Street, Sparks” and “Mill Street, Reno” show finished tract houses. In these images, a light bulb glows behind a glass picture window; three recently built tract homes glow so bright in Baltz’s night shot that the lines on one garage door almost wash out in the bath of light. In the background, the silhouette of a rocky hill darkly fills most of the frame, yet the once glorious mountains fail to moralize the desert to the extent that the tract homes make the space inhabitable. Light is now paired with edifice—it emanates when nature is dark.

The same year that Baltz shot *Nevada*, Susan Sontag (1977) published *On Photography*, her widely read treatise on the medium. In this collection of essays, Sontag suggests that photography's role in culture, since its inception, has been to record loss:

cameras began duplicating the world at that moment when the human landscape started to undergo a vertiginous rate of change: while an untold number of forms of biological and social life are being destroyed in a brief span of time, a device is available to record what is disappearing. (p. 16)

Sontag's rhetoric is interesting here as the human and natural worlds imbricate. She speaks of the "human landscape" and "biological and social" life without separating the two. The task at the end of the 1970s—as Baltz's career was gaining cadence—was to move toward seeing—and visually representing—human and natural spheres as part of the same whole. The juxtapositions of built and natural environments in *Nevada* make this point. By the end of the 1970s, however, new landscape images were necessary. To examine loss, in Sontag's notion of it, means looking not at the margins of nature and culture—glowing houses against dark hills—but rather looking at landscapes where nature and culture appear entangled.

## Historic Wastelands

"The general Character and appearance of the country I have passed is extremely Barren," writes Jedediah S. Smith (1826-1827) while crossing central Nevada on horseback: "High Rocky hills afford the only relief to the desolate waste for at the feet of these are found water and some vegetation While the intervals between are sand barren Plains" (p. 34). Smith's account evokes the transcendent form of mountains and is perhaps one of the first settler texts that characterized the Nevada desert, its flat basins anyway, as a wasteland. The land's form expresses its value and, as we will see in Baltz's later work, more than a century and a half later, the metaphor of a disposable landscape remained important to the making of its cities.

In 1986, Baltz returned to Northern Nevada to work on his second portfolio of the region. Much like the earlier project in its presentation, *Near Reno* is a series of 14 silver-gelatin prints on 8-inch by 10-inch paper, housed in a black cloth-bound portfolio case. For this project, Baltz was funded through various institutions and individuals in the state. Providing funds and support were the following: The Artists-In-Residence Program of the Nevada State Council of the Arts; the University of Nevada, Reno's Art Department; The Sierra Nevada Museum of Art; The Nevada State Council on the Arts; and private donors.

Content is the essential difference between the two portfolios made 9 years apart. Unlike the shadows and night shots of *Nevada*, images in *Near Reno* were captured at midday. The skies are milky with haze that blurs the horizon. The tones stay mostly in the middle of the grayscale, yet the images find a source of tension in their textures. A concrete pad was sharply excavated making a grave-like space for discarded, thick, and weathered fabric. The haptic quality of the junk and debris is rough. Where images of houses and light were of central interest in *Nevada*, *Near Reno* focuses on waste as its primary subject (Figures 3 and 4). Those inconsequential domestic objects in Clark's Reno homes in the 1940s now appear as discarded organic parts of the landscape in the 1980s. These household items tossed into the desert redouble the violence of sprawl. We see the television set, aluminum can, and refrigerator violently punctured by gunshot. Discarded tree limbs are tossed into the sagebrush. A dead sheep stippled with flies bakes in the sun. Waste codes these spaces as abject, yet these tossed objects also seem fused to the land, organic. Sand fills the television anchoring it into the ground. The tangled pile of yard waste is hard to distinguish from the tumbleweeds, the sagebrush, and the pile of scraped metal. Coaxial cables grow from PVC conduit like shoots sprouting after the winter. The violence applied to these objects—the punctures, cuts, and broken fibers—appear as traces of past actions taken against the wasted land itself.





**Figure 3.** Lewis Baltz, “Element #5,” 1986, from the *Near Reno* portfolio. Gelatin silver print, 6-2/3 inches high by 9-1/2 inches wide on 8 by 10-inch paper. © Lewis Baltz, courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica, California.



**Figure 4.** Lewis Baltz, “Element #6,” 1986, from *Near Reno*. Gelatin silver print, 6-2/3 inches high by 9-1/2 inches wide on 8 by 10-inch paper. © Lewis Baltz, courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica, California.

Similar marks of violence in the Nevada desert were revisited in the 1990s, developed in photographic works on the Nevada Test Site. Richard Misrach’s (1990) *Bravo 20: The Bombing of the American West* and Peter Goin’s (1991) *Nuclear Landscapes* visually investigate obliterated space in Nevada. The bullet holes of Baltz’s work are magnified at the Nevada Test Site to the



**Figure 5.** Lewis Baltz, “Element #11,” 1986, from *Near Reno*. Gelatin silver print, 6-2/3 inches high by 9-1/2 inches wide on 8 by 10-inch paper. © Lewis Baltz, courtesy Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica, California.

size of craters left by the aboveground nuclear testing of the Cold War. The works of Baltz, Misrach, and Goin make visible the implications of the wasteland aesthetic that has been projected onto the Nevada landscape since the time of Smith. James W. Hulse’s (2009) environmental history of Nevada dwells on this point. Hulse writes, “for the military and the Department of Energy, a ‘wasteland’ is what Nevada has been for many decades” (p. 122). Hulse suggests that “some miners, urbanite garbage dumpers, hunters, fishermen, and picnickers” share this perception about the region (p. 122). Furthermore, Hulse (2009) reminds us that, from its beginnings as a region in the United States, the land in Nevada was “disposed” of, as quickly as possible, by the Public Land Office in the 19th century. For Baltz’s work in *Near Reno*, focusing on the objects of waste allows the portfolio to describe an ecology of garbage that is historically linked to the spatial discourse of the region’s deserts.

For postmodern writers and image-makers such as Baltz, garbage is an attractive trope when dealing with history and ecology. Sontag (1977) writes, “America, that surreal country, is full of found objects, our junk has become art. Our junk has become history” (p. 66). Jeff Kelly (1990), writing on *Near Reno* makes a similar observation on the way Baltz’s objects express the past. Kelly (1990) says that in *Near Reno* the photographer “has sighted evidence of some prior violence which is more disturbing in its implications” (p.102). In Kelly’s reading of the portfolio, history has a way of creeping forward in time and haunting the present. In *Near Reno*, garbage then has two simultaneous functions. First, the waste speaks about past actions while interrogating older perceptions of a disposable landscape. The photographs, meanwhile, take part in documenting this older narrative. Looking at the objects in this series enables viewers to peer back into a cultural history of landscape. Second, the objects in *Near Reno* have the potential to pollute the future. Unlike the static landscape images of *Nevada*, Baltz subtly introduces movement, action, and life, into *Near Reno* (Figure 5). Looking from a ditch on the side of the road, we see blurry cars passing on the street; a withering bush catches the focus of the camera, and a pipe comes into frame from the right. “Element 11” is the lynchpin for Baltz’s garbage ecology. Unlike any image



in *Nevada* or *Near Reno*, the movement in this picture makes the multiple objects associative. Viewers are asked to consider the relationship between the speed of the car and the dying plant. The pipe, as a conduit, metaphorically draws our attention to systems of connectivity. The objects, in a sense, are animated here. Static junk becomes pollution. To represent an ecosystemic space of interconnectedness and change, rather than a landscape of nature/culture binaries, *Near Reno* shifts focus away from the fixity and stability of architecture and light, seen in *Nevada*, to the decomposing flux of waste. Patricia Yeager (2008) argues “that the binary trash/culture,” for many contemporary authors and visual artists, “has become more ethically charged and aesthetically interesting than the binary nature/culture” (p. 338). Indeed, Baltz’s nature is synthesized with junk and these images of waste express a puzzling relationship with a different conception of nature. This strange affinity is what Yeager calls a “rubbish ecology”: “If ecology has been defined as the study of organisms and their environments and has evolved to mean environmental preservation or conservation,” Yeager (2008) writes, “then rubbish ecology can be defined as the act of saving and savoring debris” (p. 329). In Baltz’s work the negativity of garbage is redoubled, in a sense. In his rubbish ecology, garbage is not preserved in the way that Yeager describes—bullets have long torn through these objects now shimmering in the sun. Neither is there a simple indictment here, an equation that litter and development is the black-and-white problem. This violence against trash, in so far as it concretizes wasteland metaphors, is, in a sense, a Nevada history. This blasted can holds, perhaps, a curious attraction, an invitation to look closely at its ragged edge. The blown-apart television screen is replaced with the surface of the photograph we look at. This image world is made familiar. The violence of the past, to which Kelly refers, might be read as a kind of dark ecology, as Timothy Morton (2007) describes it:

The ecological thought, the thinking of interconnectedness, has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic sentimental Bambification of sentient beings, but in a “goth” assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world. (pp. 184-185)

Building from Yeager’s rubbish ecology and keeping Morton’s dark ecology in mind, I am inclined to read Baltz’s work not so much as a clear call for “empathy and concern,” about the landscape (Jurovics, 2010, p. 8), or a dialectic between “anger” and “possibility” (Jurovics, 2010, p. 12). Rather, I read the images in *Near Reno* as shuttling us into spaces where we are asked to mourn the loss of a wasteland, an already disposed of remnant—a landscape aesthetic aporia of contradictory values. The opening diptych of *Near Reno*, one of Baltz’s “open landscapes,” offers us such a view. Along the periphery of the city, plenty of open space remains, space that vanishes into the distance. The horizon is not quite visible.

In this essay, I have been arguing that Baltz’s work changed from *Nevada* to *Near Reno* in order to make statements that revise historical discourses of landscape and desert. In a broader context, Baltz’s representational shift points to changing cultural conceptions of what nature might be. Baltz’s portfolios make serious indictments about culture and its relationship to environment, but they refrain from suggesting strong normative claims, how nature should be. Rather than saying our view of nature must be exalted, Baltz shows us a vernacular landscape along the margins. This landscape is what many of us find in the Nevada. It is problematic, to be sure, but it shines occasionally. A blasted aluminum can balanced on a rock expresses a violent past and a complex elegance. A gray sky is off in the distance.

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